

Talkin' Bout a Revelation:

By Debi Brock

When I first wrote about the sexual abuse¹ of children and young people in 1984, my purpose was to critique the then recently released federal government sponsored *Report of the Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youths* (the 'Badgley Report,' after its chairperson).² I was concerned with the ways in which issues which feminists have made visible are taken up by the state as a result of pressure by feminists, but in the process transformed into legal, medical and administrative categories and problems which may bear little relation to our original demands or intents.³ In a system where capitalist and patriarchal relations are deeply embedded in state institutions and practices, state responses to our demands often appears to accomplish little in the way of practically addressing the oppression of women, children and adolescents, and may ultimately result in our losing control over how social problems like sexual abuse are conceptualized and addressed.

However, in the process of doing this work, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the way in which feminists were putting the issue of sexual abuse forward — through what we might refer to as a popular feminist discourse on sexual abuse. I want to raise a number of concerns about ways of approaching sexual abuse which have general currency among feminists. I do not provide a comprehensive critique, but merely draw attention to a number of issues where it is necessary to challenge existing assumptions. Nor do I develop a critique of the burgeoning literature — which is much more complex than what boils down in popular discourse — though one can certainly also locate these problems amidst the literature itself.

While children and young people (primarily female) are the targets of sexual

abuse, its existence and prevalence is, as MacLeod and Saranga assert, a "problem of masculinity"; of how masculinity is socially constructed so that men are able to sexually abuse children and young people.⁴ To begin by addressing sexual abuse as a problem of masculinity is to bring into question from the outset the 'cycle of abuse' formulation which has gained general acceptance, including among feminists. This formulation, which poses that those who have been sexually abused themselves become abusers of their own children, has been accepted in a rather uncritical manner. How can this make sense when most of those who are abused are female and the vast majority of abusers are male? Women rarely sexually abuse their own children, whether they themselves have been sexually abused or not.⁵ This perspective appears to be derived from the more orthodox literature on sexual abuse, which categorized women in the role of colluders in the sexual abuse of their children by men, by somehow allowing it to happen. This 'blaming mother' perspective is generally rejected by feminists as it shifts attention from the real male perpetrator, but nevertheless, the notion of a 'cycle of abuse' lingers on.⁶

The call to action against sexual abuse has been supported by horrifying stories of coercion and trauma inflicted upon the victim/survivor. While this narrative certainly speaks to the reality of a great number of women and girls' lives, it is not the entire story. Where in this narrative can women who have experienced sexual abuse in a non-coercive context locate and make sense of their own experiences? Those who participated not because they were violently coerced, but because they 'didn't know that it was wrong'? What of those who found the experience pleasurable (and later felt ashamed about that)? Or those for whom molestation was such a part of the fabric of their every day existence that it was 'just the way that it was'? Without presenting a wide range of stories conveying how sexual abuse occurs, we do not get a picture of how

normalized (and therefore all the more insidious) sexual abuse can be in the lives of women and girls. It also makes it difficult for those who have these kinds of experiences to put themselves in the picture by connecting their own abuse with the sensational, dramatic stories that are so prevalent in feminist discussion, in media reports, and in the first person accounts of traumatic abuse which have become part of the 'dramatic true story' genre of mass market paperbacks.

Of course the ability of children and young people to give *informed* consent to sexual activity with an older male is rightly questioned. Any form of sexual contact indeed constitutes an abuse of power on the part of the perpetrator, and the absence of physical or psychological force does not justify the act.⁸ But knowing this does not address the issue at hand.

I suspect that the conflation of sexual abuse and 'sexual violence' adds to this obfuscation. This conflation identifies all sexual abuse as inherently violence against women, in order to identify and convey women's social powerlessness, and to link a range of practices inflicted upon women as a result of this lack of social power *vis à vis* the problem of masculinity. However, use of this term actually obscures the different ways in which sexual abuse occurs. I suggest that it would be less analytically fuzzy to map out patterns of 'sexual exploitation,' a term which identifies the operative power relations without conjuring images of beatings and other forms of physical force which may not have been part of the experience of sexual abuse. Liz Kelly also raises the point that we need to account for the "range and complexity" of how women define their own abuse, develop terms for those, and locate them on a "continuum" of sexual violence.⁹ However, while this kind of accounting is essential, Kelly's approach does not address the problems of using the term 'sexual violence' as the descriptive referent, which can actually work against her intentions. Nor is a continuum model a very useful one, as it can be used to

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present a linear model with an implicit hierarchy of experience, from mild (i.e. inappropriate touching) to the horrific. To conceptualize sexual exploitation through a *mapping* of experiences allows us to better understand the complexities of women's experiences, an approach which allows the inclusion of other, non-sexual experiences (for example, beatings, racism, poverty) which are factors in oppression and exploitation. Then we might get a more holistic, integrative picture of women's lives and the place of sexual abuse in them, a process which cannot be accomplished through the use of a continuum model. This leads to a further concern.

All too often analyses and discussion of

the dimensions and impact of sexual abuse are separated from consideration of other forms of abuse of power which women have experienced in their lives, particularly physical violence. Where physical violence is recognized as a contributing feature to the victim's trauma (for example, when it accompanies the sexual abuse), it appears to be subordinated to the impact of the sexual acts. Further, physical violence may also be occurring in separate contexts from the sexual abuse, and may have a far more traumatic impact than the incidents of sexual abuse. For example, young women and girls may be subject to frequent beatings which happen at different times and in different contexts than sexual abuse (and the beat-

ings may also be inflicted by a person other than the one responsible for the sexual abuse). In Canada at least, this subordination of acts of physical violence to the impact of sexual abuse has had an impact on government policy. When the Badgely committee was mandated to investigate child and youth sexual abuse in Canada, as a result of demands upon the state by feminists to take action, it did so by addressing sexual abuse as a discreet phenomenon. (The findings and recommendations of the Badgely committee have substantively shaped changes to legal and social policy since their report's release; for example, through the passage of Bill C-15 which introduced numerous revisions to sex-related legislation in the



Claire Weissman Wilks, *The Three Graces*, 1985, No. XIII, stone lithograph, 28.5" x 21"; from a series called *Medallion*

Criminal Code of Canada.) While studies undertaken by the committee found that the rate of physical violence was higher than that of sexual abuse (which was itself alarmingly high), they failed to address the significance of physical violence, as it was beyond their specified mandate.

Finally, emotional trauma need not be a direct result of physical and sexual abuse, or even the abuse of male power. Also formative of who we are may be the everyday experience of poverty, racism, or neglect, or traumatic events like the early death of a parent. These cannot simply be dismissed as separate issues. Any of these factors may be more constitutive of our identity (and our pain) than the experience of sexual abuse in our lives. We need to be more aware of how all of our experiences intersect and merge with one another. Sexual abuse cannot be considered in isolation.

One example of how sexual abuse becomes interpreted as the key formative experience of who we are is revealed in the belief that it bears a causal relation to women and girls becoming prostitutes. At least one study of prostitutes has found a high incidence of sexual abuse in the backgrounds of female prostitutes.¹⁰ However, if there really was a direct causal relationship, then a great many more women and girls would work in prostitution than currently do. I suspect that a high

incidence of sexual abuse among prostitutes indicates just how common an occurrence it is, particularly if a broad definition of sexual abuse is used for data collection. And if one is looking for evidence of problem sexual histories to attempt to prove a point, studying a group of prostitutes is often assumed to be a good place to start, given the sex-related character of their work (prostitutes have been scrutinized more frequently than almost any category of people one can imagine).

A commonly held perspective is that women become prostitutes because they learn through the experience of sexual abuse that they are valued most as sexual objects. The reality that women are paid more for prostitution than almost any other form of female labour would appear to confirm this logic. However, how many women who have experienced sexual abuse become feminists who *oppose* prostitution on the grounds that it sexually objectifies women? Does the experience of sexual abuse cause some women to become prostitutes and some feminists; some to (following the logic of this argument) oppose the sexual objectification of women and others to participate in it? To pose this kind of causal link is reductionist and simplistic. We need to account for other factors (for example, economic need) which come into play in determining who

finds work in prostitution.¹¹

For women who have been sexually abused, that abuse becomes constitutive of their identity in feminist discourse, and other experiences are subordinated to the power of the narrative of the sexual abuse victim/survivor. Women who reveal themselves to have been sexually abused when young risk having this become constructed as the crux of their identity—considered the formative experience of who they are. As a result, other events in or conditions of their lives appear to take on a lesser importance, and their actions are perceived as always related to their status as victims/survivors, and thus the root of personality and source of troubles. While we want women to break the silence which has surrounded sexual abuse by telling their own stories, this shadowy prescriptivism can mean that to reveal oneself as having been sexually abused as a child is to lose further control over others' perceptions. How then can women try to take control over their own lives by speaking about their experiences of sexual abuse?

In feminist analysis, 'sexual abuse' has become a monolithic category and a totalizing discourse which blurs women's experiences while it seeks to uncover them. Part of how this is accomplished is through beginning analysis by using a unitary category of 'women'.¹² Indeed it is a basic truism of feminism that the way in which



Illustration: *Kvinnbulletinen*

sexuality has been gendered provides a cornerstone for the oppression of women, through the use or threat of sexual abuse and rape: our sexual capacities are always available to men without our consent. It is a form of oppression which all women are subject to; that which we all experience simply in being women knows no boundaries of race, class, age or sexual orientation. But emphasizing what unites us so powerfully also blurs differences in how women experience abuse as a product of these same factors, when we need to know how abuse is experienced differently by women and devise strategies for addressing it which do not focus solely on gender. Some feminist therapists encourage women to reconceptualize their lives to fit the narrative of the victim/survivor, in the context of patriarchal social relations. But the 'victim of patriarchy' can only make partial sense of the experiences of the young black female who is sexually abused by the older white male. Or of the experiences of the girl from an impoverished family who must share a room with an older, abusive brother. When devising strategies for addressing sexual abuse, we need also account for the diversity of conditions which women face in, for example, reporting the abuse of their children to social service agencies or police. The Brixton Black Women's Centre points out that black women who report such abuse then have to face the racism of the police and the courts, toward themselves, their children and the perpetrator of the abuse. The manner of redress is likely to be shaped more by racism than be a response to the abuse.¹³ Perhaps once we show how forms of oppression like sexual abuse reveal a "collection of experiences,"¹⁴ entailing both similarities and differences, the term 'women' will develop a more fluid, open interpretation, and will become easier for us to use. Knowing women's different experiences of subordination is an essential basis for understanding women's lives, making connections, and forging a strategy for political action. The personal is, as ever, political. However, the current construction of sexual abuse may be leading us away from, rather than clarifying the dimensions of, sexual abuse and what we need to do to stop it. Feminist analysis must be a tool which helps us to understand our own lives and act to change them and the social relations which have made them as they are.

¹ I here use the term 'sexual abuse' to include both incestuous and non-incestuous relations, since this is an adequate degree of specification for the points that I want to raise. I want to note, however, that there is no single agreed upon definition of sexual abuse. The main points of contention focus on the range of sex-related acts to be considered sexual abuse (for example, whether verbal signals or limited but inappropriate touching should be counted as sexually abusive), and the appropriate age boundaries for defining child sexual abuse. The latter is significant in determining when a young person is able to give informed consent to engage in non-coercive, non-incestuous sexual activities.

² The Badgley Committee was mandated to undertake a comprehensive study of the incidence and prevalence of sexual abuse in Canada, and make recommendations for changes to legal and social policy. See: Committee on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youth, *Sexual Offences Against Children* (Ottawa: Department of Supply and Services, 1984). For critiques of the report, see: John Lowman, et. al. (eds.) *Regulating Sex* (Burnaby, B.C.: School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University, 1986).

³ See: Deborah Brock and Gary Kinsman, "Patriarchal Relations Ignored: An Analysis and Critique of the Badgley Report on Sexual Offences Against Children and Youths," in Lowman, 1986, *op. cit.*

⁴ Mary MacLeod and Esther Saraga, "Challenging the Orthodoxy: Towards Feminist Theory and Practice," *Feminist Review* No. 28 (January 1988): 43.

⁵ Louise Brown also raises this point in her very useful (and brave) critique of recent literature on sexual abuse. See: "The Personal is Apolitical," *Women's Review of Books* Vol. VII No. 6 (March 1990): 1.

⁶ For a more comprehensive critique of the notion of colluding mothers, see MacLeod and Saraga, 1988, *op. cit.*

⁷ Linda Gordon also notes in her study of family violence that the media picks up on the sensational, dramatic cases of violence and abuse in families, thereby missing the everyday character of violence and how it occurs. See: *Heroes of Their Own Lives* (New York: Viking, 1988).

⁸ Again, however, the matter is not so cut and dried as we would hope, given the problems of age and consent noted earlier. The most disputed concern involves same-sex sexual activity between older men and young men or boys, where the imbalance of gender power relations is not relevant (as it is in cases involving older men and young women or girls), but unequal power relations based on age remain. Many gay men have asserted that

their initial sexual experiences when young were with older men, and recall these experiences as positive and pleasurable (which is not to say that all do, as testimonies at the 1991 inquiry into the widespread sexual abuse of young people at the Mount Cashel orphanage makes clear. For more discussion of same-sex cross-generational sex, see the debate which took place in the pages of *The Body Politic*, a now defunct Toronto-based lesbian and gay liberation newspaper in the late 1970s. The debate, which followed the publication of the pro cross-generational sex article, "Men Loving Boys Loving Men," has been reprinted in: Ed Jackson and Stan Persky (eds.) *Flaunting It!* (Toronto: Pink Triangle Press, 1982). I would maintain that sexual activity between an older man and a boy remains an abuse of power relations on the part of the older male (although I admit that I am not fully sure of what age limits are appropriate in determining when the impermissible becomes permissible), even though the sexual activity may not be abusive in its effects but a welcome experience for the younger male. To dismiss the unequal power relations in operation in instances where the sexual encounters were pleasurable for the younger male is to leave the problem of masculinity unchallenged.

⁹ Liz Kelly, "What's in a Name? Defining Abuse," *Feminist Review* No. 8 (January 1988): 66-73. See also: Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1988).

¹⁰ For example, see Florence Rush, *The Best Kept Secret* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1980).

¹¹ It is also the case that being a feminist and being a prostitute are not mutually exclusive categories, as some activist prostitutes and former prostitutes have asserted.

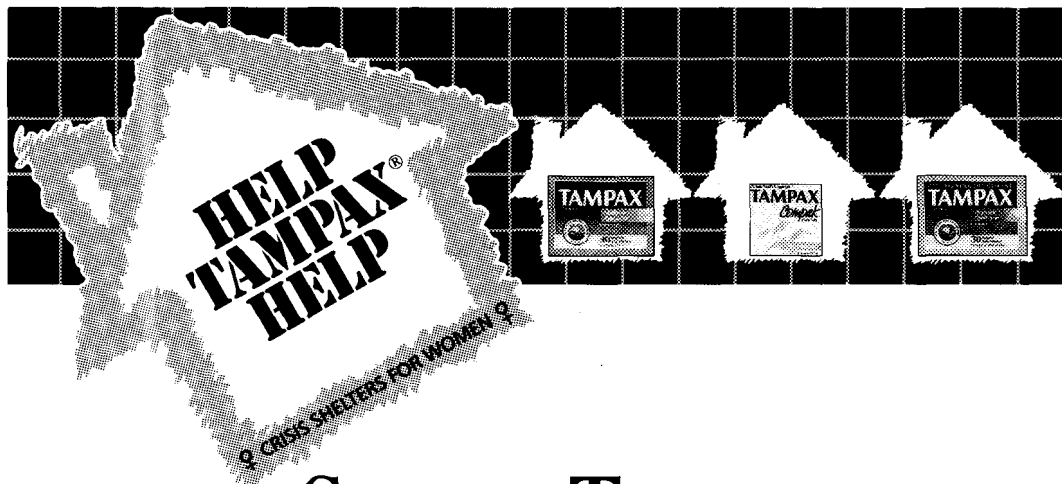
¹² On the problems of using the unitary category of 'women' see: Denise Riley, *Am I That Name?* (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1988).

¹³ Marlene T. Bogle, "Brixton Black Women's Centre Organizing on Child Sexual Abuse," *Feminist Review* No. 28 (January 1988).

¹⁴ For more on this kind of emphasis, see: Carla Freccero, "Notes of a Post-Sex Wars Theorizer," Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (eds.) *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

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